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**Speaker 1** [00:00:03] Okay. Welcome. So today we are talking with May Graham and they are going to give us their narrative. So I will just give it to you and let you get started. May the first prompt I have for you are the main prompt for this. This Auto Ethnographic narrative project is used to tell your story of your experience so far as an engineering student, and you may want to start with your background. What brought you to pursue the program? Your initial impression of the program and how you began to understand how the program fits into your life or doesn't, and how you fit into the program or don't. And you may want to include the most important characteristics of the program for you or what impact you hope it will have on your life or community. I will just hand it over to you.

**Speaker 2** [00:01:00] Thanks so much, Rachel. So yeah, I'm make m I'm in the undergraduate program for electrical and computer engineering at OSU. Identify as non-binary student. And addition to that, I am the first in my immediate family to be pursuing an undergraduate degree. So those are some identities that are really important to me and also I guess sort of set me apart in a way so my peers in engineering. Originally, I got into engineering when I joined a high school robotics program. I did first robotics, and I remember overhearing some students that were talking about how they were planning on cross-dressing. I was super curious like, What are you cross-dressing for? And they said, Well, there's a women's only event where only women can fix the robot and drive for this robotics team that we as freshmen had just joined. And I'm like, I am not exactly a woman, but I'm pretty sure they'll be. So on account of being non-male, I was invited to participate in those events. So that was a really good way that the first robotics program was supporting, trying to get more women into the program and getting more gender non-conforming people into the program. So I guess for me that worked. Originally, they were pretty surprised that I didn't want to just kind of write grants and be a cheerleader, but that I actually wanted to work on the robot. So I started learning to code, doing the electronics and programing on the robot when I was 14. So I had about four years of programing and electronics experience by the time I graduated and decided to go to university. Another one of my important identities at OSU is that I'm a transfer student. So originally after graduating high school, I didn't go to OSU and started my application but ended up going somewhere else. On early decision. And unfortunately, I did not fit that university. So there was just a number of trials and tribulations. But one example that sticks out to me was when I overheard another student talking about how glad they were that people like me were in this program because so-called, as they put it, diversity admittance, things were bringing the curve down and making it easier for them to be at this university. So there was just this overall, you know, never every student was direct enough to say like, you're just here for diversity. You don't belong here. You're bringing the curve down and making it easier for everyone. But the overarching level of support, not just from my peers but from my instructors and Tas is just not there. And I could kind of tell that this was sort of the attitude of what I was brought there to do, was just to not really fit in and be sort of this like, Oh, look what we have. So my previous university did a really terrible job supporting me and it was really hard to succeed in my classes, even though I know that I've done pretty well in high school. And once I came to OSU, my great aunt started going up and I started really understanding concepts that were so hard for me to grasp when I was at my old university. And at a certain point at my old university, I started getting really sick. Part of that was the amount of stress, the lack of support that I had. I was really far away from home. I grew up in Portland, Oregon, so Oregon has always been home to me, you know, other than just missing the race. There's still a lot of aspects of it that I missed. And part of it was. Feeling like a fully fledged human being and not being treated like. Something entirely different that I didn't really have. The cultural conception of that was related to just not identifying as male and trying to be in sort of these male interest areas without being treated like I belonged. There was a really new experience. I've done really well in robotics and I had a pretty good grasp on my studies, but when I was there, I couldn't even find other students to work with. So when I withdrew from that school on account of just medical needs, not lining up after a few long medical leaves where I would come back home to Oregon and work at Safeway and just buy groceries or stock shelves at night, which is one of my favorite jobs. I decided, you know, originally I was going to apply to OSU. It's one of the only schools I ever had the opportunity to visit. And I love the campus. I love the energy of it and the engineering program. It seemed like it was really solid and they definitely had what I was going for originally. So I went from just a computer engineering degree to electrical and computer engineering. So some of the distinctions was that they had a much better program for hands on electronics at OSU and really teaching those things and sort of a step by step way. So well, transferring was really hard because they're sort of used to transferring from community colleges and that was not the situation I was in at all. I didn't get a lot of my credits transferred over and that was difficult. But at the same time it let me kind of step back, take a few steps back, go back into some of these classes that I had really struggled to learn because I just didn't have instructor support, didn't have other students that wanted to work with me and just didn't have a level of confidence that I needed to to really be there. I think one of the things I struggled with at my old university was the sensation like if I missed a class because I was really overwhelmed or burnt out or just had something come up in life, there was this sort of expectation of like, well, you know, you're going to have to catch up on your own. You are not entitled to extra support because you were a bad student and you didn't show up for this class. And any punishment that you get any worse grades is what you deserve. And coming to OSU, if I get burnt out, I miss the class my transportation falls through there Isn't this assumption like very bad student. What have you done? There's this assumption of like, Hey, how can we help you get back into this? How can we offer support not just from the instructors led to us who are really hands on making sure that you understand things. But from the other students, there was this really competitive environment that my own university people would brag about how little sleep they got. And here there are people that, you know, kind of take my hand, walk me through things and make sure that I understand what's going on and that I can catch up so I can get good sleep, which we're all very proud here to do. So I'm obviously a little bit biased in my experience at another university gave me these expectations of what it's supposed to look like and how I'm supposed to be treated as a student. And Oregon State University just wiped off the slate. It was like, No, this is how we do it here. We support each other. We look after each other. We try to help everyone get up to speed. And so I went from no one really wanting to work with me in a project group to having friends and people that wanted to ask me how things worked or really valued my opinion on what we should be doing in a project group or, you know, went to me for help. That was immensely beneficial to my confidence that I wasn't just like, this person doesn't belong and is here to bring the grade curve down, but that I was here to help people work with people so that both of us understood things better because we're not focused on the grade curve and who we're going to stomp over to try to make our grades a little bit higher. We were focused on just believing that we could work together so that everyone in this class can get through it and can get our degree and become engineers and the sensation that we do all belong here. So I came back to Oregon. OSU was just a really obvious choice for me. I love Oregon and I felt like. I would kind of be returning to my culture and where I come from, which was never as a competitive an environment and had this really different look at gender nonconforming people. Were there people, you know, as very controversial cultural opinion that we hold over here on the West Coast. But it exceeded my expectations. To be honest, I was I was just hoping to get a little bit of that back and I got so much more. I've been able to connect with people that have really different backgrounds, really different cultures and really different outlooks. But I haven't been surrounded by this assumption that my lack of humanity is normal or that I'm here to kind of be stepped over, but rather have been surrounded by people who are willing to learn about the way I view things and and see my humanity as kind of a default in a culture that they're trying to strive to and be a part of as the general vibe of the university. So I've I've had a wonderful time here. I've really enjoyed the clubs. I've really enjoyed some of the amazing professors that have gone to work with. But most importantly, I've just been absolutely awestruck by the student body and the degree that people work together here and the degree that people try to lift each other up. It's helped me get through and understand topics that I never could. There is one class at my old university that I dropped, I think three times because I was just struggling to understand it. I was struggling to figure out the workload and every time it was just so intimidating and I felt like I had no help. And I took that class once. It was in a state, and it was largely the same material. I didn't understand it in that previous context, and I didn't have the support that I needed. But here. I thrived and I was able to really take things at a pace that worked for me. I was able to focus more on my studies and less on how difficult it was to be in an environment that honestly felt kind of oppressive at my old university. That was just very accepting and that people really gave me kind of this full confidence not just in being a full person, but in being competent and being someone that they could ask about the material and have conversations about it and that we could learn from each other and that would benefit both of us instead of kind of this attitude of like, if I help you, it's going to hurt me, or, you know, I don't want to work with you in my project group because you're just a different kind of person and we're not going to get along or I don't know, it's entirely difficult to compare the two because it really was just night and day. And I think that. You know, I don't fully understand how Oregon State has cultivated this culture of acceptance, in this culture of teamwork in their engineering program. But I'm really amazed with how successful it's been. I think part of it is that a lot of the talks that I've heard from people that are brought into the classroom to talk about ethics, to talk about conflict, to talk about just the culture that we want to see in engineering is something that was really different, that we didn't do so much at my old university. We talked a little bit of that once. You were like a freshman just coming in. But Oregon State has kind of continued with that and integrated it back into their engineering program and made it more of a consistent habit to focus on these things. So I think maybe that's one of the effort that has helped. But the students, the level of support, I just felt like I was never penalized for falling behind, but rather really supported in being able to move forward and being able to understand things that I just couldn't before. So it's been a fantastic experience and I would make this decision again. I definitely didn't feel like, you know, I grew up in Portland, This is still Oregon. That's still very similar to kind of how I felt growing up. And it was a really good decision to kind of come back home for that.

**Speaker 1** [00:13:07] Wow, what an amazing perspective. I'll just have to say, as an instructor, I mean, it's wonderful to hear the positivity, the positive aspects of your experience. And I'm so glad. I wonder, could you say a little bit you kind of touched on the culture at the previous university where it you did not feel like it was supportive and you touched on a kind of competitive culture or just a lack of awareness. Could you? I was just wondering if you could expand on that a little bit more in terms of characterizing what was it about the culture of the previous university or just in general cultures that you don't find supportive?

**Speaker 2** [00:13:55] So one thing that I noticed a lot at my old university was a stress culture. And there was this competition over who was most stressed out, who was kind of going through it the most. And. There were also some really interesting things around how much money different students have, becoming this huge straight association between success and failure. I was around a lot of people who had grown up around professional tutors who their parents were able to pay all of their tuition, all of their food, all of their housing expenses without issues. They didn't have to work jobs. And so you always had this expectation of, you know, you would have all of the time on your hand, you wouldn't have to work a job in addition to school. But students like me just weren't like that. I can remember one student getting angry at me that I was entitled to a work study position. I was pretty confused about that because the student didn't have a job and they said, Well, it makes it so much easier for you to have a job so that your parents don't have to pay for everything. And I'm like, Your parents are able to pay for everything. Like, step back a little and realize like this work study job that I have to do. I was working 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. because that was the only work study job I could find was with our public Security department as this kind of desk aide, and that made it really hard to make it home classes that were 4 hours later. And here's this person who's angry and envious of me because they can make money at four in the morning and that they get to stay up reading and doing assignments instead just because it meant that their parents had to pay so much. But there was full financial aid. They didn't have to work. So there was just this huge culture of like, I have it so hard, I have it harder than you. And for people who actually had to work these other jobs, we we struggled with kind of the social settings because we'd be asleep a lot during the day, at least in my case, or you'd be at work a lot of the time and you couldn't really connect with people. And when people are talking about, you know, their struggles with, you know, how many hours they had to spend with a tutor or how they can't work a work study because their parents are too rich, It was really hard to get along with them and associate with them and kind of they'd get uncomfortable around you because they weren't really prepared for the kind of issues in life that you were facing with food insecurity. They're like, Oh, whoa, like, I don't want to hear about that. And it was a it was a really weird culture for me with a lot of people that came from different backgrounds. And I did make a lot of friends at certain points, but there was just always kind of the certain barrier of experience. And I think that university was expecting a completely different kind of student and they made a lot of kind of motions to be like, we're accepting people from different backgrounds, we're providing them with support. And it would be, you know, maybe once every couple of months you'd come in for like a lunch that they'd hold for the first and family students and they'd talk to you about how that's going, or they would provide you, you know, here's some meetings with some employees to like, reach out to, and they can help you through that. But they oftentimes didn't have that much direct support for you. And when you're trying to work, you know, 5 hours, four nights a week in the evening time and sleeping during the daytime, how can you really meet with these individuals and how can you really set aside the time to kind of go into their offices and work with these programs and the level of connection they had with individual professors, which were actually kind of, you know, grading you and giving you the the tasks that you're doing, which was really low. And a lot of times the other things that there was so much competition for a professor's time and. You would have a lot of students that would come into office hours just to try to. Brown knows them, are trying to get research with them or try to build this sort of relationship with them to progress them and network with them. And I didn't leave a lot of time for the students that came in because they're confused and they need help. And also, there's this attitude where a lot of the professors treated you like you were wasting their time. Always you. We try to support each other in getting enough sleep. We don't really try to compete over who's the most stressed out. I just haven't really seen that. I haven't seen competing over much of anything. And people from different backgrounds have these open, empathetic conversations where you learn about what their experiences are and you work around the challenges that they have, whether it is from their family, from their job. There's a lot more people with jobs. So that's a very normal experience to be like, Hey, I'm not going to be around for this amount of time. There's a lot of really good availability in the area for student jobs and just for stuff for us to do to try to keep us afloat throughout this. Housing is a lot more affordable, food is a lot more affordable. And the professors. They don't really treat you like you're brown nosing them or like they don't have time for you. Or like if you haven't gotten to a point where you're fully understanding things that you're just not even worth it at this point because you haven't contributed enough. There's a lot more of this expectation of like, I'm here for you where you're at, because I feel like they've seen people that are everywhere and actually had to work with those people and they don't just wait for someone in some weird office that handles these situations to tell them like you need to be more supportive. They are by default that level of supportive and engaged. And I think there's just this level of personal responsibility for how their students are doing that I didn't see before. But at OSU, they they really. They almost seem like they stressed themselves out a lot more just to try to help the students and keep them. Up to date and season success. And there is just this level of personal dedication and personal empathy that I wasn't really used to, and it's allowed me to feel a lot more comfortable approaching them.

**Speaker 1** [00:20:30] Thank you, ma'am. And this last few minutes, I was hoping you could also touch on a couple of things. Firstly, if you could speak to the particular strengths and contributions that you feel like you have from your perspective that you bring to OSU, to universities in general, and that you'll bring to teams in industry that you work with. And then also on the other hand, you've said a lot of positive things about OSU. So happy to hear again. I'm also wondering if there are some some areas for improvement that you think OSU and our program could focus on to be more supportive and to help students succeed.

**Speaker 2** [00:21:28] So I'm going to start with the second one first. I think maintaining a constant focus on accessibility and making sure the resources like labs, classrooms are accessible to students with different abilities, students with different kind of transportation limitations. It definitely has been hard having to kind of bus to class when the bus only runs once an hour. So sometimes that to make the decision 10 minutes late to class, 50 minutes early. And I know that it was you really does participate in kind of the landscape of transportation around the university and also has this huge kind of issue to tackle of making sure that the campus is really accessible, that I would like to see more work maintaining the efforts that we're doing there and putting more efforts in to reach out to those students. I think the. We've done pretty well finding opportunities for student employment, but that's also something that I'd like to see develop further and make sure that all students have access to employment opportunities that work well with their schedule. Because I've definitely seen some students that are struggling with employment that is not either paying enough for them to live on or that has a schedule that's not allowing them to work cohesively with school. I think that we might need to. Put a little bit more focus on. Applying Jesus to group situations and making sure that there's always kind of somebody in the room helping because it can be really hard to deal with conflicts. It can be something that a lot of students aren't necessarily prepared to do. And in some of my classes. When you met with your group, there was always a tie there. And that was something where we had a lot of resources to access and and talk to that about the class. And I felt like that was a really good use of time. And we also were kind of never really thrown to the sharks or just kind of like fending for ourselves. And I think some of that oversight can be really good, a bit more hands on, on making sure that we're actually maintaining as a student body the kind of cultures that we want to see here. And I think the tears can be a really important part of modeling that and helping us with that. I also think it's sometimes that we could do a little bit better with the lab equipment we're working with, but I realize it's a pretty expensive task that we're always trying to, you know, be able to afford things that are working and up to date, you know, for not having printers when you need them at certain points and having to walk across campus to them to. Having, you know. To usually buy my own soldering equipment like what the lab had to offer. So there's certain things. But yeah, those are details as far as what I've brought to the university. So I have a longer coding background and I feel like a lot of the people, the education that they got kind of before I showed up was really focused on the electronics. So it's been this wonderful experience where also at my old university there was more of a coding heavy focus because it was computer engineering and I did not find a lot of there electronics classes accessible. So here I've been working with a lot of students who are really good electronics and that I can help them get up to date with the programing. So maybe specifically we could look at providing more cohesive software learning because a lot of students I see are still struggling with that. And that's been something that I've been able to reach out to people and kind of help walk them through. Just because I have more of a storied background in that sort of a field. I do think we're doing pretty well with our career outreach. There's been a lot of career events and I've been able to take advantage of them. I think the makeup program is doing really well, but maybe a little bit more oversight to make sure that students who don't get into makeup still get that extra level of support and help participating in that. I really enjoyed some of the virtual events because it meant that even if I couldn't transport myself to campus, I could still participate in these career events. That's been a problem for me because I live a little bit of a distance away. That and something that I actually really liked about when COVID was happening and things were virtual was my issues with transportation didn't become my issues as a student when we were able to all be there virtually. So I think leveraging those in a more skilled and targeted way could perhaps help. But some of the other things that I brought to the table. So one of the interesting things about my high school robotics program was that almost everyone that was really in robotics and spent a lot of time and it was also in speech and debate. And I remember that it was really hard for me early on. I spent a lot of time being like, Why am I here? I just want to do the robotics. Why do we all do this speech and debate thing? And fighting like this really isn't for me. But I also had this attitude that if something's really terrifying for you and it's really difficult, you should probably stick with it and figure out why and try to get over that, because I think sometimes some of the things that we avoid the most or is just because it's the most difficult for us and that you should instead of saying like, that's just not for me, you should figure out why you should get more into it specifically because of how much you don't like it and how much you have this nervous instinct to avoid it. And so being able to speak and present my ideas is definitely one of the strengths that I think a lot of projects have relied on me, not just to kind of demonstrate our work and convince other people over ideas that they're good and help communicate how they're going, but also to help guide us and organize the effort that we're going to do and communicate with the group throughout like a refined, cohesive vision. So I think those communication skills are leading me towards potentially a different career path than just working kind of in software for the rest of my life, simply because it's been a really unique thing for an engineer to have so much specialization with and to have focused so much on. And I think it's really interesting that it's something that I hated because it was so hard for me and now I kind of view it as one of my biggest strengths just because I stuck with that and did maybe what didn't feel natural until it was second nature.

**Speaker 1** [00:28:17] Absolutely. And so I want to thank you for your time. And is there anything else that you would want to add?

**Speaker 2** [00:28:28] I really appreciate the students here and the professors and the environment that they've created. I. I really didn't like college before I came here, and I am now so, so happy that I made the decision to transfer here and that I could really see what it's like when it's done better, a lot better, and what it's like to be a part of a community that's really accepting to. Everyone that's here. And I'm really proud to be a part of this. The student population.

**Speaker 1** [00:29:07] Thank you so much for your contribution to this project is extremely valuable and we appreciate your willingness to share.

**Speaker 2** [00:29:17] Thank you for having me, Rachel.